



**ABC Online**

**PM - Macquarie Island criticised as environmental disaster**

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**Reporter: Tim Jeanes**

MARK COLVIN: A World Heritage area that's a national embarrassment: that's how some scientists are describing Macquarie Island in Australia's sub-Antarctic waters. They say a population explosion of rabbits and rats is wrecking what should be an environmental treasure.

Tim Jeanes reports.

TIM JEANES: Doctor Jenny Scott doesn't mince words when it comes to the current state of Australia's Macquarie Island.

JENNY SCOTT: It's an embarrassment, it's a shocking situation, the tourists really are distressed when they see this horrible destruction all around them, and it's a very embarrassing thing to explain to well-travelled international tourists.

They come to Macquarie Island and they see this place and they're astounded and can't understand why, and you have to explain why, and it's just a bad scene.

TIM JEANES: At 55 degrees south, Macquarie Island lies about half way between Tasmania and Antarctica. It's a haven for a range of wildlife, including about three-and-a-half million seabirds, including a threatened population of wandering albatrosses.

And recently it's been a haven for exploding numbers of feral rats and rabbits. The problem is partly due to a successful eradication program of feral cats.

Doctor Scott, from the University of Tasmania's School of Geography and Environmental Studies, says the end result is the trashing of sensitive environmental areas.

JENNY SCOTT: And I say trashed, I mean literally trashed, it's a horrible sight. I'm talking about the steep coastal slopes here, which are sort of the iconic landscape feature of Macquarie Island.

It's usually with wildlife on the beaches below, and that's what people think of when they see Macquarie Island. And unfortunately a lot of those slopes are, the untouched slopes that have never been grazed, and they are the ones that are really being hammered at the moment.

So they now look brown, with tussocks stumps and big erosion gullies and it's just heartbreaking to see.

TIM JEANES: Equally heartbreaking, says Doctor Scott, is that an eradication plan for

the rabbits and rats is already in place, just waiting to be put into action. She's laying the blame with the Federal Environment Department.

JENNY SCOTT: Bureaucracy and money, I guess. As a university scientist I can say these things. It's quite a large sum of money, but it's a very small sum of money in terms of getting a successful eradication of a feral species.

It's a good news story, absolutely, if that money is given. And internationally and nationally it would be a great thing.

TIM JEANES: A statement from the Federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell says that as Macquarie Island is part of Tasmania, it's principally a responsibility of that State Government.

But Mr Campbell says recognising the island's World Heritage Status, and the impact of pests on its values, the Government has contributed \$1.3 million for pest eradication.

The Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service says the eradication of pests is one of the main conservation priorities for the island. It says funding options are being explored. Whoever's responsible, tourist operators say urgent action is needed.

Shirley Russ is from New Zealand-based Heritage Expeditions.

SHIRLEY RUSS: For people visiting it, it is a very disappointing situation to see, because you're not seeing the island as it could be or as it should be protected within a World Heritage site. From a conservation point of view it is a very poor story.

TIM JEANES: Meanwhile, Doctor Jenny Scott says it's vital that Macquarie Island doesn't become a case of out of sight, out of mind.

JENNY SCOTT: It's almost at the end of the world, but it's an incredible area, it's seen as one of Australia's jewels of the southern ocean, the other being Herd Island, it's just a marvellous place, it's on the World Heritage area, it's in incredible sub-Antarctic island with huge biological diversity. As much as one cares about beautiful wild places, this is very, very important.

TIM JEANES: And if we don't go ahead with this plan?

JENNY SCOTT: If we don't go ahead with the plan the island will become more and more degraded, and it's just a disgrace, it's loss of biodiversity, it's loss of World Heritage values, it's loss of critical habitat, it's just an international disgrace.

MARK COLVIN: Doctor Jenny Scott from the University of Tasmania's School of Geography and Environmental Studies, ending that report from Tim Jeanes.

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